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Remembering Responsibly

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'There were our own, there were the others [. . .] why should I not sing *them*?'¹ questions the first elegy in the Scottish poet-solider Hamish Henderson's *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenacia*. The imperative to commit acts of remembrance during and after the events of a war is an ancient one, and intrinsically linked to what Paul Connerton calls the 'ethics of memory',² a moral obligation to remember past people and events. Indeed, the majority of the action of Homer's *Iliad* could be read as stemming from the moral obligation to remember, which we see work in different ways: from Achilles's raging vengeance, Andromache's keening anticipation of the death of her husband, and Priam's negotiations in mourning for Hector, to Nestor's meditated advice born out of experience of previous wars, and the funeral games of Patroclus. The action of the *Iliad* and its relation to memory and remembrance, as in many people's memories of the wars of the last century and beyond, stem from a concern for *one's own*, predicated on the allies *versus* enemies model of conventional, or 'symmetric', warfare. However, in Henderson's lines we see concern for all people, nations and perspectives who have been affected by conflict (in Henderson's case, African, British and German), and, as the elegies go on, this extends to a concern for all those who have been affected by *any* conflict.

The global memorial concern of Henderson's poet-speaker is a prelude to several of the concerns surrounding the idea of responsible remembrance, or the interplay of just memory and just conflict. The field of conflict has changed radically from that of previous ages, boundaries are increasingly blurred between nation states, the interpretations of what constitute 'good' and 'evil' acts of war are confused, and the tradition of Hellenic militarism of which Achilles, Priam and Hector provide a hybrid archetype is fast dissolving. We are thus led increasingly to ask *who* and *what* it is appropriate to remember, and *how* it is appropriate to remember them. War-remembrance models now no longer fall neatly into the themes of either Dunbar's *timor mortis* (war experience as a reminder of the frailty of human life) or Horace's *aere perennis* (the elegiac monument built to everlastingly celebrate the lives of soldiers). And, as Marc Augé writes, the duty to forget is often as important as the duty to remember; there are unethical or inappropriate notes struck by many national acts of remembrance now which 'contort the

hideous shape of the unspeakable [. . .] into the banalities of ordinary mediocrity [beautifying] death and horror'.³ We meet a paradox wherein the consolation offered by forgetting (or remembering) acts of war operates simultaneously with the unacceptability of forgetting (or remembering) these same acts. In order to even begin to address these inquietudes, it is important to look first at the different ways in which memory and remembrance functions in relation to contemporary conflict on both personal and international levels.

Memory, as we have seen across this collection of essays, is intimately connected to the way we constitute our selves. This can be seen in the impulse to collect objects or in an accretion of autobiographical memories. As we have seen even in this book, in the section on the Digital, memory works, too, in the conscious editing of good / bad, true / false memories in our online and offline 'selves', as a battle waged against forgetting, in the prosthetisation of the brain's capacity to remember into the digital archive and in the use of online remembering tools or programmes. Memories of various types also influence physical development, skill-attributes and the way we interact with our environment. In line with the digitally self-constitutive memory acts here, various commentators on contemporary warfare and the ethics of soldiering pay close attention to the disaffection or distancing between the soldier and his humanity produced by the advances in the digital technologies of war. Other commentators have noted the increased application of affective interaction in the counterinsurgency work which forms a solid foundation for contemporary techniques of war. Although seemingly opposed, the disaffective and the affective schools of thought both work towards the same thing: an up-to-date ethics of warfare which takes into account all of the possible implications for humanity of the ways in which war is waged today.

Christopher Coker's *Warrior Geeks* (2013) maps the rise and demise of the Homeric warrior-figure in Western military thought alongside the rise of the 'warrior geek' – the 'cyber-' or 'cubicle-' warrior,⁴ who fights a depersonalised online battle in a cyberspace environment, purposefully disconnected from the human reality of war due to the psychological and physical toll of the violent experiences and difficult ethical choices it involves. The dissociation of the 'warrior geek' is a radically different one from that of Achilles in his thymotic rage, where he is disaffected by the pleas of his peers and his elders, and mercilessly disconnected from any person that stands in his way. Peter Sloterdijk writes that in his rage Achilles becomes a 'complete warrior'. His rage is completely externalised, and in possession of the ultimate clarity of mission he no longer possesses an inner (morally reflective, remembering) life: 'Fog arises, yet shapes become more determinate. Now clear lines lead to the object. The enraged attack knows where it wants to hit. [He] "enters the world like the bullet enters the battle"'.⁵ The 'complete' warrior geek, however, is physically and psychologically detached from the object of his attack. The opposite of Achilles in his berserker-like fury, his or her dissociation is effective in its affectlessness.

The drone and its pilot is the logical, scientised conclusion to nearly a century of distance-wars. For a century, the technologies of warfare have increasingly addressed a problem oft-cited by scholars of the Second World War: that in the

heat of battle only 15–20 percent of allied soldiers actually fired their weapons, the personal ethical decision to not kill overcoming the international message of the war being a just war, a war for humanity against evil. In this case, remembering responsibly in Henderson's sense is exactly the sort of memory which, in the heat of action, could cost soldiers their sanity, their jobs, and even their lives. This statistic did not go unnoticed for long, and a revolution in Western military training took place aimed at desensitising soldiers to their targets. Practice dummies were for the first time made human-shaped in the hope that in the heat of battle soldiers would forget Mark's commandment to love your neighbour as yourself (Chapter 12, Verse 31), and the tenth commandment, and learnt to disassociate the image of a human enemy from their own humanity. Equally, military technologies were developed to put as much as possible physical distance between soldier and target. As Susan Neiman writes, 'resistance to killing someone decreases in direct proportion to distance from them'.⁶ A manipulation of memory takes place whereby the soldier is taught to be desensitised and to forget the human nature of a target, whilst at the same time he or she is taught to espouse a (completely human) bond of brotherhood with fellow soldiers. The most important memory in this case is the development of and ability to use niche skill-attributes.

The effective affective distancing of the complete warrior geek is achieved through a feat of distancing, deferral and derealisation. They exist in an environment where warfare is made to be 'like a videogame',⁷ their battle-view is taken on by a co-pilot, who analyses real-time footage of the object of attack, and their decisions are taken on by an operations team. A senior officer will, on advice, give the final word as to whether a strike will or will not take place. Elements that make up the psyche of the conventional soldier are now split between a team of many, and the drone pilot's use of memory/experience as an effective moral indicator is eradicated; his or her experience of war in the 'online' context will bear almost no resemblance to the war memories of the 'offline' soldier, which are often saturated with emotions ranging from boredom to disgust, fear, exhaustion and terror, memories which have been instrumental in the formation of legal and ethical approaches to warfare. Indeed, the strength of the cybersoldier lies in his or her lack of proximity to and lack of memory formation regarding warfare: logic and nondeclarative memory prevail in the online war environment, and decision-making processes are abdicated to a dedicated chain of command structure.

It does not take Pavlovian experimentation, Hebbian theory or Freudian psychoanalysis to tell us that it is proximity to and affective engagement with warfare that leads to the most productive and ethical remembrances of war. It is possible, and often therapeutic, to mourn and to celebrate through acts of remembrance lives lost and injuries suffered by known individuals engaged in warfare, just as it is possible to decry the violence done through war to 'our own' and 'the others'. War memorials in poetry and stone are often built around list upon list of names, dates and places. But how is it possible to encompass in these acts of remembrance the disassociated, disaffective warrior geek, so far from human engagement with an enemy as to render the human elements of warfare (name, date, place) almost negligible? The soldier for whom warfare is 'fucking cool',

'like a videogame',⁸ and who has restricted decision-making power, has nothing important to recall regarding their status as combatant: nothing to remember or to be remembered by.

In contrast to the ultra-modern, ultra-online, purposefully disaffected and un-remembering cyber-soldier, is the figure of the counterinsurgent soldier, another product of twenty-first-century warfare. The counterinsurgent differs as radically from the affect-riddled external-facing Homeric warrior as does the warrior-geek. However, where the cyber-soldier works in an infrastructure of disaffection and non-proximity where nondeclarative memory skills are used and soldiers are shielded from using and constructing declarative memories, the counterinsurgent is a finely-tuned grass-roots level warrior of 'hearts and minds', trained to take accountability, and to build on knowledge of a given situation through experience and memory. The counterinsurgent warrior wages war within the context of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri label as the 'armed police work' of a contemporary style of war which operates as part of a global system of 'affective industries'.⁹

War is no longer a question of winning territory, but of sharing space and information, and winning the trust and understanding of communities. By dint of their proximity to potential hostile forces, through working within communities and patrolling and sharing their space, any conflict experienced by the counterinsurgent soldier will be immediate, direct and kinetic, with sometimes horrific casualties. These soldiers learn efficacy from proximity (just as the cyber-soldier operates effectively through distance); declarative memory is a major element of the way in which they wage war, as memories of incidents and effective psychogeographic mapping of space are major factors in strategy formation. The war memories thus developed can be as much to do with gaining trust of 'the others' as they can be of the work done with one's own soldiers, or of fighting, bomb-disposal, and the frustration of the 'courageous restraint' which made David Petraeus's doctrines of counterinsurgency so effective. Soldiers' descriptions of operational tours often involve the bombastic statistic that they are 98 percent boredom and two percent adrenaline. In spite of the boredoms and frustrations, the counterinsurgent is a soldier finely-tuned to the national, international and personal ramifications of his decisions. What better reflection of Henderson's memorial phrase than this?

Soldiers thus return from contemporary conflicts having waged very different sorts of warfare, and formed radically different memories from their experiences of war. Both elicit very different responses from a thinking public regarding the ethics of war and of remembrance. A cenotaph built with Horace's monument 'more lasting than bronze' is no longer wholly appropriate. It is not feasible to perform week-long funeral games for each fallen warrior as in Homeric times, nor can an exhaustive catalogue of injuries inflicted and suffered be made. Equally, the anti-war (or pro-peace) protest commemorates the other side of warfare, bringing to the foreground the problem of the ethics of remembrance as well as of war. How can the memories of current conflicts be transmuted appropriately into some form of remembrance? What, now, are the ethics which underlie the 'imperative' to remember?

When Adorno wrote in his now oft-cited, and frequently decontextualised, essay 'Cultural Criticism and Society', that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric',¹⁰ he was commenting in part on the ethics of remembrance; the 'hideous shape of the unspeakable' that Augé sees so many national monuments assume. There is a difficult dialectic which operates when national and personal monuments to memory come under question, between barbarism and culture, the individual and the state, the morally correct and the hierarchically sanctioned, all within the political, global contexts in which the ethics of remembrance also tread softly. The global cultural memory must still take into account the cultural barbarism of the concentration camps of WW2, the ethically disastrous nationally implemented repression or prescriptive forgetting of the Japanese military atrocities perpetrated on the Sino-Russian border in WW2, or, more recently, the suppression of knowledge regarding the activities which took place in the Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay detention camps, just as a therapeutic personal forgetting of various acts of war must also take place.

Without a complete sense of 'just' war, 'just' remembrance cannot take place, and a monument 'more lasting than bronze' must be unshakeably morally just in its foundations and constructions. But in an age fascinated by 'survivor accounts' and driven by the moral importance of acts of testimony, we are apt to forget the responsibility of remembrance, which is often, as Shoshana Feldman notes, a solitary responsibility, and the frequently inaccurate and incomplete nature of testimony, as well as the moral ramifications of the distribution of its often difficult subject-matter.¹¹ In this context, Jeffrey Blustein is right to question the morality of memory and forgetting, since just as not all memory is accurate or just, not all forgetting is prescriptive or repressive:

in our contemporary post-Holocaust world, where memory, however painful its content or contexts, is prized, socially sanctioned, and even sanctified, there is understandable reluctance in many quarters to seriously take up the matter of forgetting and to consider what value it may have.¹²

Equally, with so many 'witnesses' and 'survivors', so many perspectives on 'our own' and 'the others', acts of remembrance on both personal and national scales will always be incomplete. These are what Mieke Bal sees as some of memory's 'many tricks',¹³ and what Christopher Coker calls the 'treachery' of memory.¹⁴

It is therapeutic for the soldier returning from war to participate in acts of remembrance, even to write documents of witness of his or her experiences, just as it is therapeutic for the families of the injured or lost to mourn and to rail against the conflict. Yet remembrance is a double-edged sword. It is dangerous, through acts of remembrance, to fetishize the figure of the warrior or the idea of war, or the figure of the survivor and the apparently authentic document of testimony. It is dangerous, too, to not remember enough, and thus disable the remembrance process that is necessary to the formation of moral and ethical judgments and 'good' or 'just' acts. How, then, is it possible, with the centenary of the Great War looming as we write this, to remember

responsibly? And how far and wide must this net of appropriate remembrance be cast? These are the questions which have informed this piece of writing, and which, although they may well not have any hard and fast final answer, are the imperative foundation – and capstones – to every act of remembrance which now takes place.

Notes

1. Hamish Henderson, *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenacia* (Edinburgh: Hamish Hamilton, 1948), 2.
2. Paul Connerton, with Jeffrey Kastern and Sina Najafi, 'Historical Awareness: An Interview with Paul Connerton', *Cabinet Magazine* 42 (2009).
3. Marc Augé, *Oblivion*, trans. Marjoligm de Jager (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 88.
4. Christopher Coker, *Warrior Geeks: How 21st Century Technology Is Changing the Way We Fight and Think About War* (London: Hurst & Co., 2013), 111.
5. Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation*, trans. Mario Wenning (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 10.
6. Susan Neiman, *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-Up Idealists* (London: Bodley Head, 2009), 371.
7. See Peter Singer, *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 230.
8. A drone pilot quoted in Singer, *Wired for War*, 230.
9. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).
10. Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Shelley Weber Nicholson and Samuel Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 34.
11. See Shoshana Feldman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992).
12. Jeffrey Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5.
13. Mieke Bal, 'Memory Acts: Performing Subjectivity', *boijmans bulletin* 1(2) (2001), 12.
14. Coker, *Warrior Geeks*, 47.